

Bridging gaps and jumping through hoops

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ABSTRACT

The wider context of arts and humanities education in the UK has demanded that university teachers and administrators focus on 'end points'. Increased emphasis on the generic and transferable skills attained through arts and humanities programmes, along with intense concern to raise students' reported levels of satisfaction, do not necessarily help university teachers to make the best use of the expanding body of research on how students actually learn from assessment and feedback. This article focuses not on the final-year students, whose views are increasingly solicited in satisfaction surveys, but on two cohorts of first-year History students as they write their first essays and have their first experiences of feedback in a research-intensive institution. The article explores at a micro-level some of the factors which earlier research has identified as critical to the development of assessment and feedback practices which are conducive to students' self-regulation and future learning.

KEYWORDS

Assessment, feedback, learning, History, transition

INTRODUCTION

The expanding literature on assessment and feedback in higher education is concerned with three key questions: how students learn through assessment and feedback, what students are actually learning through these processes, and how satisfied students are with their experiences. From the mid-1990s, the emphasis of Biggs (1996) on the 'constructive alignment' of assessment with teaching led to increased expectation that learning outcomes should be clearly specified, along with the activities which help students to achieve such outcomes, and the means and criteria by which success is to be judged. Despite some debate over the extent and means by which complex intellectual processing skills (as opposed to competency in specific tasks) can be defined in terms of learning outcomes (Melton, 1996), the core principle of 'constructive alignment' holds sway at the level of curriculum design in UK universities. Commenting on the growing body of research which has explored the precise conditions under which assessment and feedback can best contribute to the learning of individual students (e.g. Sadler, 1989; Boud, 2000; Yorke, 2003; Taras, 2005; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Hounsell, 2007; Shute, 2008), Boud and Molloy (2013) have recently called for sustainable learning-from-feedback to be embedded into curriculum design. In addition to this continued interest in how students learn from

assessment and feedback, contextual factors have also invited greater attention to what students are actually learning, and to how satisfied they are with their experiences.

AHHE's 2013 forum on assessment and feedback pinpointed some key issues. As state funding for undergraduate education in arts and humanities subjects diminishes in the UK in particular, and as individual learners assume greater financial responsibility, there is increased pressure on departments to highlight to students, parents, policy-makers and the wider public, the generic and transferable skills that graduates will take with them into the job market (Huber and Brawley, 2013: 4). This focus on the 'end point' potentially creates a disconnect between the overarching aims of a degree programme and the everyday experiences of university teachers. Programme specifications point to the higher cognitive skills that students develop in the course of an arts and humanities degree programme: retrieval, selection and evaluation of information; critical thinking, analysis and problem-solving; effective communication of complex information, ideas and judgements. Most of the day-to-day work of teaching and assessing students, however, is done at level of the individual module, and continues to revolve around discipline-specific knowledge and conventions.

Referring to North American research which indicated that students did not make significant learning gains in their first two years of undergraduate education, Heiland and Rosenthal (2013: 9) argue that excessive emphasis on measuring 'general competencies' ignores the reality that skills are cultivated in different ways by different academic disciplines. Such research potentially obscures rather than highlights what students are actually learning, and its application to the everyday practice of university teachers is problematic. Although there has long been considerable consensus around the desirability of feedback on assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998), and although teachers are constantly reminded of its role in motivating students and improving their performance (e.g. Race, 2007: 7-21), what teachers actually expect from students when they set assessment tasks, and what teachers will try to convey to students in their feedback may be strongly influenced – among other things - by the epistemological models of their discipline (Yorke, 2003: 485; Black, 1998).

In the UK, this tension between the overarching aims of degree programmes on the one hand, and the everyday experience of discipline-specific learning, teaching and assessment on the other, is accompanied by acute concern over students' reported levels of satisfaction. As institutions compete to recruit the school leavers who have A and B grades at A'level, institutional performance in the National Student Survey (NSS), and favourable comparison in the Key Information Sets, have become matters of survival. Adams and McNab (2013) thus explain that, in recognition of persistent difficulties in raising the levels of reported satisfaction in the assessment and feedback section of the NSS, the TESTA project aims at Transforming the Student Experience Through Assessment. The Assessment Experience Questionnaire is distributed to final-year students, and asks a series of questions derived from earlier research into the conditions under which assessment and feedback best contributes to student learning (e.g. appropriateness of assessment tasks, clear communication of goals and standards, quantity of feedback). Results are then interrogated to establish the extent to which each of these conditions is met, and the impact of this on the overall satisfaction of

students. Adams and McNab (2013: 36) conclude: ‘teachers in the arts and humanities should focus on ensuring that students understand goals and standards, particularly by giving feedback often and in time for application to other learning activities and assignments.’ TESTA findings, then, are expected to be useful to departments both in meeting the challenges of ‘constructive alignment’ at the level of curriculum design (i.e. ensuring that assessment is appropriate and encourages deep rather than surface learning), and in deciding how to regulate the everyday practice of teachers (e.g. rules to ensure that marking criteria are included in every module outline and that students receive feedback on one essay before the next essay is due).

Following on from the mini-forum on assessment and feedback, this article shares some of the concerns of Heiland and Rosenthal (2013) about the extent to which student learning is accurately captured in generic and transferable programme outcomes, and is mindful of Huber and Brawley’s (2013: 3-4) observations about the potential for ‘external accountability movements’ to alienate university teachers who care about disciplinary learning (see Brawley et al, 2013 for an Australian example). In the US context, Heiland and Rosenthal highlight the valuable work of Indiana University’s History Learning Project in ‘decoding’ disciplinary knowledge and conventions, and identifying specific ‘blockages’ to History students’ learning. History teachers in UK universities are also the beneficiaries of numerous explorations of students’ motivations for studying history, their changing understanding of the discipline over the course of a degree programme, and the kinds of learning activities and assessment tasks that promote deeper learning and greater independence (e.g. Booth, 1997, 2001 and 2003; Booth and Hyland, 1996 and 2000).

In this article, I respond to the continued need identified by Heiland and Rosenthal (2013: 15) for local studies – ‘class by class and department by department’. I shift the focus away from the final-year undergraduates whose views are solicited through the TESTA and the NSS, and who receive considerable attention from UK university teachers and administrators, as well as the media. Instead, I concentrate on two cohorts of first-year students as they write their very first History essays at a UK university and have their first experiences of receiving feedback. At one level, then, this article can be read as a contribution to the emerging field of ‘transition pedagogy’ (albeit in terms more comparable with those of Ballinger, 2003 than with those of Kift et al, 2010). It seeks to explore at a micro-level some of those characteristics of learners, learning milieu and curriculum which Boud and Molloy (2013) identify as critical to the development of assessment and feedback practices which are dialogic, sustainable and conducive to students’ self-regulation and future learning.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

My own experiences of assessing and providing feedback to first-year students point to three underlying problems which are familiar to educational researchers. Firstly, even at the level of the

individual module, there is a gap between learning outcomes (which must be listed as a handful of bullet points on a module specification form) and the way in which assessments are actually devised and marked. Whereas vocational training tends to focus on 'convergence' – i.e. bringing all learners up to a requisite level of skill in order to certify that they can perform specific tasks – assessment in arts and humanities subjects is almost always 'divergent' – i.e. it determines how well each student performs in an open-ended task (see Melton, 1996 for a critique). At the level of everyday practice, assessments in arts and humanities subjects are rarely marked on a pass / fail basis with reference to learning outcomes. The first-year History essays that I discuss in this article are marked according to criteria which were devised several years ago for use across a range of arts and humanities subjects. The criteria act not as a scheme, accounting for each and every mark within a given essay question, but as descriptors of quality matching up to the ranges of marks that are associated with degree classifications. Markers can easily use these criteria to come to a consensus on whether an essay should be marked at 55 or 75, but they cannot easily use them to specify why a given essay has been marked at 63 rather than 64. Nor are they likely to find the latter exercise particularly worthwhile.

My argument here is not that university teachers need a scheme which accounts for each and every mark within each and every essay question. In reviewing the impact of criteria-based assessment in the national curriculum for UK schools, Knight concludes that complex learning cannot always be 'affordably assessed by highly reliable means' (James and Gipps, 1998 cited in Knight, 2002: 291), and that if universities wish to promote a broad and ambitious curriculum, they may need to accept that 'fuzzy criteria' are often the best available guide to judgement (Sainsbury and Sizmur, 1998 cited in Knight, 2002: 291). ASKe (2007 and 2009) and Price et al (2008) similarly caution against futile quests for ever more specific criteria against which to assess the complex and multi-dimensional learning which is supposed to take place in universities. My concern here is that whilst university teachers may be used to working with 'fuzzy criteria', first-year History undergraduates are not, and we need understand why they are not in order to work out how to cultivate better mutual understanding.

The second set of problems relates to students' perceptions of themselves as learners. Socio-cognitive research into 'mindsets' and 'self theories' (e.g. Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Dweck, 1999; Grant and Dweck, 2003) has long suggested that the most successful learners are those who are able to learn from failure and to derive satisfaction from striving to improve. These findings have been taken up in more popular books and articles about success (e.g. Bloom, 1985; Ericsson, Prietula and Cokely, 2007; Gladwell, 2008) which seek to debunk myths about the exceptionally talented individual by emphasising that real skill and expertise can only be acquired through intensive and sustained effort on the part of any individual, and may also require supportive networks. Here, however, I am less concerned with popular perceptions about the dangers of excessive praise, or the benefits of teaching children to strive, than with the location of students' 'self-theories' (Dweck, 1999; Yorke and Knight, 2004) in the specific context of the contemporary UK school / college sector and increased grade requirements for university entrance.

A'levels have long been a very compressed period of study, serving more as a filter for university entrance than as 'terminal' qualifications in the UK system. In a short period of between 13 and 18 months, teenagers must decide which subject most interests them and where their aptitudes lie, and factor in a range of other considerations about the nature and reputations of universities and specific degree programmes, along with location, cost and future employment prospects. Final decisions about what and where to study are also influenced by predictions about the likelihood of meeting the entrance requirements for their chosen institutions and programmes. All this has long been the case, and it is scarcely surprising that many students emerge from their A'levels with a strong orientation towards 'performance goals'.

What has changed, in the past decade, is both the format and timing of A'level assessment, and the extent to which students' performance at A'level in all subjects is publicised through league tables and attributed to the effectiveness of teacher-input. In this article, I seek to identify some of the impacts of these changes on students' self-theories, hypothesising that whilst the orientation to performance goals is stronger than ever, there is also a deeply-felt belief and expectation that teacher-input is and should be a key factor in whether students achieve these goals. In this respect, I seek to update some of the findings of Booth (1997) who did some comparable research into the expectations of first-year History students at Nottingham University before the advent of Curriculum 2000, and came up with some rather different results.

The third set of problems relates to the institutional context. As universities compete for fee-paying applicants who are aware of highly visible measures of student satisfaction and student achievement, there is an increasing association of the 'quality' of education with processes which guarantee the extent and form of teacher-input at specific stages of a degree programme (see Cooper, 2007 for a recent critique). This works in tandem with the behaviourist assumptions that continue to underlie much assessment practice: if processes are in place to guarantee feedback that is specific and timely and personalised, the desired outcomes should be achieved in the form of more satisfied and higher achieving students. The problem here is that the definition of feedback is teacher-centred. In other words, the emphasis is on provision of feedback by teachers, and not on understanding how students interpret, internalise or apply that feedback (see also Carless 2006, Boud and Molloy 2013). In my own institution, this problem manifests itself in regular disagreements around individual face-to-face appointments: in recent internal student satisfaction surveys, a significant minority of first- and second-year History students disagree with the statement 'I get a chance to discuss my marks', whilst teachers report sitting in their designated office and feedback hours waiting for students who never show up. It is this kind of discrepancy that this article seeks to explain, drawing together information about first-year History students' prior educational experiences, their perceptions of their own and their tutors' roles in their learning, and their experiences of assessment and feedback in their first semester at university.

RESEARCHING THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Students' expectations and perceptions are inherently subjective, and may vary significantly between the hundreds of thousands of individuals who go under the label 'student'. Attempts to impose a quantitative framework on expectations and perceptions (as in national and internal student satisfaction surveys) are 'best used for indicative purposes to identify areas for further investigation' (HEA, 2008: 3). In other words, they raise as many questions as they answer. On the other hand, there is a danger that small-scale qualitative investigations, rather like staff-student consultative committees, tell us a great deal about the strongly held views of self-selecting individuals, and relatively little about whether these views are shared in the wider student population. I wanted this investigation to be useful to those people who teach History and make decisions about the management of History programmes, and I therefore combined methods that would allow individual students to express their subjective views, expectations, experiences and perceptions, but would also enable an informed commentary on the extent to which these views might be more widely shared.

The first phase of my investigation was essentially a fact-finding mission amongst first-year History students in my own university, which is a member of the Russell Group and therefore defines itself as a 'research intensive' institution. I designed a questionnaire which was distributed to a cohort of approximately 200 students during a lecture in a compulsory first-year History module in week 2 of semester 1 (October 2011). The questionnaire asked students about their educational backgrounds, including the types of schools they had attended, the qualifications they had obtained, the forms of assessment that they had undertaken, the type of input that their teachers had provided, which assessments they had most enjoyed, and which assessments they thought would prove most useful in preparing them for university study. With neither the ability nor desire to compel students to complete the questionnaire, it was impossible to eradicate an element of self-selection. Ninety-four students completed the questionnaire in full, 37 deliberately returned a blank questionnaire, and the remainder either completed only part of the questionnaire, or forgot to hand it back.

I supplemented this first questionnaire with an online search of the main A'level examination boards, and thereby acquired examples of past questions and explanations of the marking criteria that are applied. In two semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers of A'level History, I was given some concrete examples of how teachers prepare their students for A'level assessments (including classroom activities and practice questions), and the types of written feedback that teachers provide to their students. The teachers also volunteered their personal opinions on practices such as target grade setting and the publication of league tables, and the extent to which they felt that their A'level students were prepared for university study.

The second phase of my investigation sought to establish what History students expected in terms of assessment and feedback during their first year at university, and how they perceived the

assessments they had undertaken and the feedback they had received thus far. Despite the difficulties of achieving a sufficiently large and random sample in the first questionnaire, I wanted to conduct a second questionnaire because I thought that this was the best available means of capturing the views of a range of students. However, I did not want to design a questionnaire that simply asked students to confirm or deny the thoughts that I attributed to them. Rather, I wanted to hear directly from individual students and to allow for perspectives that I would not have anticipated on the basis of my own experience. Therefore, before I drafted the questionnaire, I put out a request for student volunteers to join focus groups in the second half of semester 1. I hoped to conduct two focus groups but only had enough volunteers for one. Five students responded to my email request, but only three turned up at the meeting. Although I had prepared some prompt questions based on my interviews with the A'level teachers and the results of the first questionnaire, the students proved to be very forthcoming, and the conversation ranged across students' opinions on A'levels, their experience of the transition to university, what they had found difficult in their first essays, and their reactions to the feedback they had received.

After the focus group, I identified a series of statements made by the students, and paraphrased these into the second questionnaire, on which students were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements, or were neutral. Although the questionnaires were distributed in a compulsory lecture that should have been attended by approximately 200 students, the attendance was lower than it should have been, and a larger number of students again chose to hand back blank questionnaires at the end of the session. There are various possible explanations for this (including 'questionnaire fatigue', as the module evaluation forms had been handed out just a few days before). The responses amounted to approximately one quarter of the cohort, and there was clearly a significant element of self-selection at work. This means that the results are not amenable to statistical analysis. In order to generate a larger body of data, I repeated the questionnaire at the same point in the following academic year (i.e. week 10 of semester 1, after the students had received feedback on their first assessed essays, and before their second essays were due). This time I received 118 responses, and therefore managed to access the views of approximately half the cohort. The second questionnaire, then, was distributed to two cohorts of students: the last cohort who entered when the 'top up' fee was fixed at approximately £3500 per year, and the first cohort to pay the new fee of approximately £9000 per year. In this article I use the questionnaire results for the purposes of description, and for the identification of possible connections between phenomena, rather than claiming to 'prove' correlation or causality.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. Students' experiences of writing their first assessed essays

In the focus group students were much more critical of A'levels than I had anticipated. In addition to the numerous instances of re-marking which had seriously undermined their confidence in the examination boards, one of the students also expressed a deeper scepticism about the very nature

of the qualification. S/he described as A'levels as 'hoops you have to jump through in order to get into uni', and concluded that 'they don't prepare you to be independent at all'. I asked students what exactly had made the transition from A'level to university study difficult for them. The short examination questions set at A1(i.e in the first year of A'level study) are clearly very different from the papers that students sit at the end of their first year in university. The extended essay / personal study set at A2 (the second year of A'level study), on the other hand, appeared much closer to the essays that the students were required to write during semester 1. In the first questionnaire, the extended essay / personal study was the single most common form of assessment that the students listed in their response to the question: ' Which type of assessment do you think was most helpful in preparing you for what you will be doing at university?'

Students in the focus group isolated two main differences between their A'level extended essay / project and those they were asked to write at university:

- The volume and difficulty of reading: during their A'levels they could draw on class notes and textbooks, and they used the internet. At university the type of reading matter was different. Journal articles often assumed prior knowledge but at least they were short and it was often possible to grasp the main argument. Academic monographs, on the other hand, were particularly difficult. The students felt that lecturers underestimated this problem, and they felt a need for pointers on reading lists and intermediate material to bridge the gap between what they were used to reading and what they were now expected to read.
- Teacher-input at the planning stage: the students indicated that were unsure what they ought to include in their essays and that whilst A'level teachers would read and comment on a plan or even a draft, at university they had to make a stab in the dark and decide for themselves what they should include. Students thus felt that whilst they had gained certain technical competencies (such as referencing, and accessing electronic journals) during their study skills module at university, they did not feel that this had really helped them to write their first assessed essays.

The second questionnaire threw up some interesting impressions as to the extent that the views expressed in the focus group could be generalised to the wider student body. The respondents in both the 2011/12 and 2012/13 cohorts were divided over whether A'levels were a useful preparation for the work they were doing at university. Respondents in 2011/12 were more negative: 42% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that A'levels were a useful preparation. In the 2012/13 cohort, for which the response rate was better, feelings towards A'levels appeared to be more positive, with 66% agreeing or strongly agreeing that A'levels were a useful preparation.¹ Student opinion was also divided as to how difficult the reading was, and whether reading lists should be shorter. There was a great deal of consensus, however, around the statements that reading lists ought to contain pointers so that students would know what they were

¹ I wondered whether the balance of responses might have been different if I had phrased the question differently - i.e. by inviting responses to the more negative assertion that 'A'levels are not a good preparation for university study'.

looking for (89% in 2011/12 and 90% in 2012/13 either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement), and that lecturers ought to be willing to read essay plans (in both cohorts 87% either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement).

2. Students' perceptions of feedback on essays

Students in the focus group were sceptical of unassessed essays. In this context, 'unassessed essays' are taken in by a tutor, who must provide each student with a mark and comments, although the mark does not count towards the student's end-of-module average. Students agreed that the written comments enabled them to follow the marker's logic in awarding a mark, but they did not think that this was 'formative' because it was providing reasons after the fact. They could use the comments to understand why the marker had liked or not liked their answer to a particular question, but they did not think that this necessarily helped them to write the next essay which would be on a different topic (and would presumably pose the same challenges in deciding for themselves what was relevant without teacher-input at the essay-planning stage).

The questionnaires did not indicate that this view was widely shared within a given cohort or consistent between cohorts. In the 2011/12 cohort, over four-fifths of the respondents to the questionnaire agreed that the written comments helped them to understand why they had been given a particular mark, whilst only two-thirds either agreed or strongly agreed that 'after I have read the written comments on my essays, I understand how I can improve my work next time'. In 2012/13 cohort, for which the response rate was better, three-quarters of students appeared to be convinced by the usefulness of written comments in helping them understand their marks, and a very similar proportion agreed that written comments helped them understand how to improve. It is difficult to be sure whether the difference between the cohorts can be attributed to a change in what teachers write or a difference in how the student respondents interpreted the teachers' comments.

The students in the focus group insisted that in order for written feedback to be truly 'formative' it needed to be followed up with a one-to-one discussion with the tutor. The second questionnaire suggested that there was considerable consensus around the desirability of one-to-one face-to-face feedback, with over 80% of respondents in both cohorts agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement 'a one-to-one discussion with the lecturer who marks your work is the most useful form of feedback'. This matches the findings of both the national and internal student surveys, which consistently suggest that students value one-to-one feedback, and yet academics regularly report that students do not visit them in their office and feedback hours in order to have the one-to-one discussions.

In the focus group, one student commented on the timing of assessments, stating that 'as soon as you finish one, the next one is coming', and the timing of feedback is widely recognised as a challenge a modularised curriculum (Yorke and Knight, 2004: 33). Nonetheless, the student's explanation is not entirely satisfactory, because in the particular modules that these students had taken in semester 1, there was an unassessed essay which preceded the assessed essay, and opportunities for one-to-one discussions were available on a weekly basis. Another student suggested that the one-to-one should be made compulsory for each module, which raises again the question of why so many students say that they value one-to-one feedback and yet relatively few are prepared take it up on a voluntary basis. The discrepancy points to some more fundamental questions about how students perceive their relationships with academics and the role that they think academics should play in their learning.

3. Beliefs about the lecturer-student relationship and its contribution to learning

The focus group and second questionnaire provide an insight into two underlying beliefs about feedback which might explain some of the discrepancies between provision, take-up and satisfaction. During the focus group, I commented that when I was at university, back in the dark ages of the 1990s, tutors regarded themselves as experts who were entitled to comment on students' abilities and sometimes they simply told you that you weren't very good. The students in the focus group were genuinely horrified by this scenario. One student described this as 'completely unacceptable' and went on to explain that 'we pay to learn' and that feedback that helped the student to improve was an essential element of this learning. This differs from the findings of Booth (1997: 210) whose questionnaire among first-year History students in Nottingham in 1997 did not attract a single response which disagreed with the statement 'it mostly up to you how you do'.

I wanted to know whether the view of the student in my focus group was more widely shared, so I included in the second questionnaire the statement: 'assessment is only worthwhile if it helps you to do better next time'. In both the 2011/12 and 2012/13 cohorts, 89% of students indicated that they either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This suggests that many students are hostile to summative judgements on performance and that some also question the legitimacy of judgements about ability within an educational setting. The majority believe that assessment must contain a formative dimension in order for it to be worthwhile, and by 'formative' they understand 'feedback that helps you do better next time'. They draw a fundamental link between this type of feedback and 'education'.

The second striking finding in the 2011/12 cohort was the high level of ambivalence that students expressed regarding their relationships with tutors. During the focus group, I was surprised by the students' familiarity with the concept of 'transition'. One student volunteered a comparison between the transition from A'level to university, and the transition from GCSE to A'level. Both were processes of learning to do new and more difficult things, but in the GCSE / A'level transition,

the teachers were very supportive, whereas 'at uni you are on your own'. In the questionnaire, 51% of students either disagreed with, or were neutral towards, the statement 'I believe that my lecturers want me to succeed at university'. The implications of this are discussed below (although it should be noted that, in the 2012/13 cohort, which had a better response rate, students reported more positive feelings towards their tutors).

INTERPRETATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the focus group and questionnaire are most usefully interpreted in the light of students' self-theories (Yorke and Knight, 2004). Clearly there is variation within the student body, and self-theories are by definition individual. Nonetheless, in view of contemporary developments in the UK school / college sector, it would be most surprising if students' prior educational experiences did not orientate them towards performance goals. Students set themselves performance goals in terms of meeting the entrance requirements for their chosen degree programme and institution, and in the case of History in a Russell Group university, this usually means that they need an A in History plus As or Bs in their other subjects. These personal goals are reinforced by the practice of target grade setting in schools and colleges, which is a means by which teachers can be held responsible by school / college management for the performance of students.

This institutional and individual emphasis on the achievement of performance goals has paradoxical effects on teacher-student relationships. On the one hand, it may lead to intense pressure on both parties. On the other hand, the students in my focus group indicated that they had valued the personal support of their teachers, and they recalled in very positive terms the commitment that teachers had shown in helping their students obtain a place at a Russell Group university. In all three of the contexts in which they had studied for A'level (private school, state school, college of further education), the students envisaged a three-way relationship which could be summarised as teachers and students together against the examination board. In other words, students saw their teachers as allies who were helping them to achieve their performance goals, and this perspective is tacitly endorsed by school / college management practices.

This has significant implications for the ways in which students perceive their own and their tutors' roles in their learning when they arrive at university, and it may create difficulties for both parties in negotiating satisfactory relationships. I would suggest that, in the context of resource constraints (i.e. the impossibility of dramatically decreasing staff-student ratios through hiring large numbers of new academic staff), these difficulties are best addressed through more continuing professional development (CPD) activities which take place at the subject level. The imposition of quality assurance processes will not bring change unless university teachers are more aware of research which is directly relevant to how they engage with students in their own subject area.

1. Academic feedback and personal tutoring systems

The first issue arises in the extent to which students feel 'supported' at university, and a comparison with Booth (2001: 489) demonstrates that this is not new. Most students will be confronted with higher staff-student ratios and lower contact hours than those to which they are accustomed at school / college, and this is perhaps most acute in arts and humanities subjects which entail large amounts of independent study - especially reading which, as we saw above, is not straightforward (see also Wineburg, 1991). Add to this a modular curriculum and team-teaching, and it is easy to see why some students feel that no teacher is specifically committed to them as an individual. Many UK universities are now attempting to strengthen personal tutoring systems across all subject areas in order to counter this perception of lack of support to the individual student. In the author's institution, new guidance on personal tutoring emphasises regularity of contact, the auditing of students' skills, and forms which invite students to interpret and respond to feedback received in separate modules, and discuss this with their personal tutor. Some of the logic for this is explained by Cramp (2011). Whilst the personal tutor may lack the advantage of topic-specific knowledge when it comes to clarifying areas of misunderstanding in a particular assignment, he/she does not have to combine the functions of marker and teacher that are simultaneously demanded of a module tutor. Rather than focusing on feedback (i.e. justifying a mark), a personal tutor can focus on 'feed-forward' (i.e. helping students to identify recurrent strengths and weaknesses, and potential steps and sources of support for improvement).

As Cramp (2011) also acknowledges, however, processes alone cannot guarantee the kinds of supportive relationships that the student participants in my investigation appeared to be looking for. It may therefore be beneficial for departments to arrange continuing professional development (CPD) activities which raise awareness amongst teaching staff of the substantial body of research which demonstrates how students experience feedback as a threat to self-esteem, and how important feedback can be for motivation and self-efficacy (see Carless, 2006; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). My focus group, and both rounds of the second questionnaire, point to this psychological factor as a potential explanation for the discrepancy between how much students say they value face-to-face feedback, and their willingness to take this up in module tutors' office hours: students who fear negative feedback from module tutors and struggle to learn from it on their own may derive more benefit from feedback that is discussed in the context of a supportive personal tutorial relationship. Academics struggling to balance teaching, administration and research might be more inclined to prioritise the cultivation of these relationships if they were provided with evidence of their vital importance in student learning and a workload allocation model which recognises the time that this requires. So long as learning and teaching is considered primarily in terms of processes designed to raise NSS scores, this cultural shift is unlikely to take place.

2. Self-regulation and 'fuzzy' criteria

There is also a need for university teachers to know more about their students' prior educational experiences and to anticipate the effect of these experiences in shaping students' understanding of the assessment tasks that are set, and their expectations of the input and feedback that tutors will provide. The essays that students write – particularly at A1 – are fundamentally different from those set at university. Whilst in principle the questions at A1 are also open-ended, the range of answers and the range of material on which students might draw are in fact quite circumscribed. Whilst the A2 assessments appear more open-ended, students receive considerable teacher-input in interpreting questions and structuring answers. My first questionnaire – administered right at the start of students' university experience - indicated that students were very aware of the marking criteria when they produced work for their A'level teachers. Over four-fifths of respondents indicated that they had understood the criteria clearly and that explanations of the marking criteria were one of the ways in which they thought their A'level teachers could help them raise their grade. Bearing in mind that almost every History student at this university enters with a grade A in History A'level, it is unsurprising that many of them think that an understanding of the marking criteria was a key factor in their performance.

Much educational research emphasises the benefits to students of understanding assessment criteria, not simply in devising strategies to meet performance goals, but in internalising standards and becoming more self-regulating and thus more independent (Boud, 2000; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Norton, 2007). Difficulties in achieving this arise partly because, as explained above, the criteria in History at university operate differently from those to which students become accustomed at A'level. They are essentially 'fuzzy' criteria, or descriptive statements about quality which match up to degree classifications. When students do not understand this, they may feel frustrated by the apparent lack of clarity or specificity: they may want to know why one essay is a 64 and the other a 66 whilst the marker is quite satisfied that both essays are a mid 2.1; they may ask how many items they have to cite in order to meet the 'knowledge' criteria for a 2.1, how many extra marks will be given if they cite an extra item that is not specified on the reading list, or how many marks will be deducted for errors in the bibliography. These are questions that academics often interpret not as attempts to 'self-regulate' but as a form of 'learned helplessness' in which students refuse to show effort or initiative and simply want to maximise their marks by soliciting cues from markers.

The findings of the TESTA project give cause for cautious optimism in this regard. Although the outcomes of arts humanities programmes might well be expressed in terms of generic skills (e.g. 'critical thinking') which are, in everyday practice, coded in disciplinary conventions and assessed by 'fuzzy criteria', final-year students on such programmes actually appear to be more satisfied with their experiences of assessment and feedback than those students in subjects which appear to lend themselves to highly explicit and reliably measurable learning outcomes (Heiland and Rosenthal, 2013: 48). In other words, despite their experiences of highly specific or even 'closed' criteria at A'level, there is clearly some scope for a shift in students' understanding of assessment during their time at university.

In his discussion of study skills for History students, Booth (2001) advocated sessions which go beyond tackling deficits in skills and seek to stimulate greater reflexivity on the part of learners. At a general level, I endorse this, but would also advocate for more specific attention to the gap between students' experiences of assessment and feedback at A'level and those at university. CPD time might be used to redesign study skills sessions so that students have opportunities to discuss and internalise 'fuzzy' criteria. For example, when students are shown two essays which interpret the question differently and bring different sources to bear, but achieve equally good marks, they may begin to believe tutors' claims that 'there is no right answer'. Once students begin to believe this, giving them opportunities to think like markers, and handle work of differing standards, could also be beneficial.

It is important, however, that activities aimed at fostering this mutual understanding should be developed by university teachers with reference to their own disciplines. The point is to develop mutually acceptable understandings of open-ended tasks and the criteria by which these will be judged so that students can internalise standards and learn how to regulate themselves. Institutional policies which seek to raise reported levels of student satisfaction by encouraging the use of forms of teacher-input on which students have learned to rely at A'level (e.g. 'model answers') are unlikely to generate better learning relationships in university classrooms if such practices are alien to disciplinary epistemology. Paradoxically, such policies may actually work against the very skills and attributes which students are supposed to acquire by the 'end point' of an arts and humanities degree. Most History degrees culminate in a final-year dissertation. Effective supervision implies that students are able to respond to their tutors' feedback: by extending their research (through better effective retrieval and selection of information); by thinking critically about what they have learned and reformulating their questions; by evaluating competing interpretations; and improving their communication of complex information, ideas and judgements. Policies which favour closed questions and tighter criteria earlier on in the programme may actually inhibit students' capacity for the reflexivity and self-regulation that a dissertation demands.

3. Know what your student knows

The Secretary of State for Education has recently acknowledged some of the difficulties in regulating A'level examination boards which compete for 'market share', and pointed to the potential benefits of bringing academics back in to the assessment process.² But academics are likely to be more effective, both in helping to design curricula and assessment at A'level, and in teaching first-year university students, if they know more about developments since Curriculum 2000. It need not be expensive, time-consuming or difficult to start the process: simply invite an experienced A'level

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17588292> [accessed on 29 July 2013]

teacher in a relevant subject to attend a staff meeting and talk about what they do.³ This recommendation is consistent with that made by Booth (1997), who argued that relationships between academics and students are improved when academics understand students' prior educational experience and have more informed expectations of students' knowledge and skills on arrival. This is not simply a question of measuring students' 'baseline' in order to plan for their progress towards the specified outcomes for the programme; it also helps to minimise the occasions on which academics, however inadvertently, make their students 'feel stupid'. Driven by concerns about graduate employability, twenty-first century curriculum reform often works by identifying the desirable skills and outcomes at the 'end point', and planning how students can be brought towards this point. This article, along with Booth (1997), and a growing literature on student transition (see Marland, 2003 for an overview), all point to importance of the 'entry point', both for staff-student relationships and for curriculum design. Ausubel's (1968) emphasis on 'starting points' is as relevant now as it was 44 years ago.

Note

Copies of the questionnaires and a recording of the focus group are in the author's possession and can be made available to other researchers on request. Please email the author on k.a.skinner@bham.ac.uk

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³ This was done in the author's own unit in February 2012. It was neither expensive nor difficult to arrange, and staff members derived genuine benefit from it. I am grateful to the teacher for her assistance.

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